

The Society Bug *by* Jack Lait

HER NIBS, the Duchess, that de luxe trimmer and slyper, feeling the humid season upon her in the city of her residence and endeavors, put it up to her husband, Monk the Mole, retired safe wrecker and now financial angel to the world of larceny, that they were due for the ocean saphys or the hill-top breezes.

The Mole, as was his habit, bowed to the suggestion of his adored and growled that he was ready for anything, from murder to mosquitoes. So the Duchess inquired about and leased a furnished house at a retreat which had many rural advantages, including a social atmosphere. When the Duchess presented herself in person to the agent (and the underworld hadn't named her the Duchess for nothing) and answered to the query regarding her husband's occupation that most impressive of all American titles, "Private banker," she got the house. And she drove up with the Mole in their ponderous car, and the neighbors, looking between the curtains, wagged their heads in approval.

The Duchess met the other women who had summer homes nearby, and they admired her behavior in dress and her knack of wearing good clothes well. There was just enough of the blarney about her to stand her out among the others; proper, for she wore a daring dab of contrasting color here and there, and the little jade elephant dangling from her hidden ears gave her an individual quality that would have been grotesque on any woman less poised, charming and naturally gifted with a genius for showing up the conventions.

The Duchess golfed skillfully, danced witchingly, yet never dangerously, and in her bathing costume she was a wow. Before she had been at Landsmere for a fortnight she had made all the men dizzy and all their wives envious, yet amiable; and woman has never accomplished more than that.

The Duchess had a way of "selling" her personality that had wafted her out of many a tight corner and into many a soft spot. She registered breeding—and naturally; wasn't she the daughter of one of the best bottom dealers in Chicago? The frumps and chumps about her realized that she could have stolen their husbands, but wouldn't. The male satellites realized that she could be frivolous without ever becoming free. When the cocktails were served she always slipped, but never gizzled; when a man pressed her hand in a dance she pressed back—acknowledging, but never encouraging.

The Duchess loved the life. She and the Mole talked it over when they were alone, when they felt at ease to converse in their natural vernacular. And they decided that this interlude of respectability was a relief from the tension of professional life, which, despite the fine science to which it had been perfected by both these nifty malefactors, was still a strenuous strain and stretch.

And they decided that there was to be no "rough stuff" at Landsmere—this was a vacation, a layoff. They had enough money to afford a couple of months in complete relaxation from the scheming and devising of accomplishment and the ear-cocking and vigilance of the kickbacks.

For this period they would be just an honest man and his good wife in repose, worried only over the little pleasures of making a holiday happy. Even amusement was not to be high string and hectic—just a well-dressed loll, hobnobbing among the square suckers, and even these deserved a hiatus, though it seemed almost a shame to see so much good material go to waste.

No, there should be no "work" at Landsmere.

The Mole could not refrain, in the privacy of the domestic twosome, from deploring the security of the genial thugs, who were just made to order and just screaming to be taken; for there is something about hard eggs who are terrors for discipline and bearcats for system in town that makes them forget their ineptitudes, their maxims, their crossing signals and their emergency brakes when they leave home to spin along the pleasure-plated byways of playtime.

And the Duchess sighed now and again, a jumpy little sigh, to think that she was letting these tough birds with their defense down walk about in absolute immunity, carrying her money in their pockets.

Still, it had been declared a closed season for clucks, and the Duchess and the Mole waived their birthright and let the lambs gambol at will, while they mingled and observed with many a smile.

They began to like it—to enjoy it. They began to be really immersed in the little social skirmishes, the mild bridge tournaments, the milk-and-water intrigues, the piffing diplomacies—which always mark all lib social circles such as one encounters aboard ship, at health resorts or in country colonies.

The lion of Landsmere, by sort of general acclamation, was Digby Manners, an oil operator. Manners was pompous, hefty, florid and forward. He had engaged the most stately of the rentable residences, he entertained most loosely, he assumed the leadership with a Napoleonic aggressiveness, and no one seemed ready or eager to dispute him in his self-elevated estate of dictator and rajah. He was one of the rare birds who swell themselves, talk over anyone else, turn out to be the hosts at other folks' parties and the principal guests at their own, and still "get over."

Manners took a fancy to the Duchess and the Mole—principally the Duchess—on sight, and he flamboyantly established them pronto. He invited them to the home of an opera singer who was giving up a moonlight lawn picnic, presented them to everyone, patronized them without reserve, told the Duchess she was the best-looking little filly he had laid his tired eyes on in this administration, slapped the Mole on his husky back with resounding approval, and thus set them in solidly. After that it was like shooting fish.

Manners was the noisiest, the most technical and the worst golfer on the links; he played the most vociferous and most villainous hand at auction bridge; he danced a foxtrot as badly as he did a one-step (both exactly alike), and he wore white socks with tan shoes, yet he retained his hold by sheer forcefulness.

He was a widower. His household consisted of the servants. His liquor was, like himself, kicky and offbeat; his cigars were the fattest and blackest known to commerce. When he wanted to be emphatic, and he was never less than that even when he didn't especially aim to be, he would whack the flat of his hand on a table or bring his palms together. No sotto voce for Digby Manners—no subtle retards. He was fat and forte. His range was between allegro and crescendo.

The Monk the Mole, known as the Buttons of Philadelphia for the Landsmere run, gave him the inquiring all-over and came to the private conclusion that Manners was a particularly inspired sort of ass. To them he was a shrieking duck-call, for he had so many weaknesses that he must be vulnerable in many spots, a horn boob that a self-respecting small-time crook would blush to enquire at.

Had they encountered him in any other surroundings or circumstances, they would have turned him inside out just for luck, because it seemed a shame to let an oversized puff and preface about, with his mouth wide open and his eyes shut, hungering for a nice tin minnow for breakfast.

But they had pulled in their lines, laid the bait on ice and turned vegetarian pro tem. So they let Digby Manners strut his stuff and line up the timorous resorters this way and that way, and they even lined up with them—for they wanted recreation and respite, not victory or profit, at this time.

Manners' attentions were rather broad toward the Duchess—but so was all of him and everything he did. The Monk didn't mind, and she didn't mind. If it amused Manners—O. K. The spirit of the day was against conflict.

The Lion of Landsmere went as far as to surreptitiously

"You know, Monk," she gurgled, "this racket isn't half rotten. These poor yokels have a good time in their own simple-minded way, and the queer part of it is I'm with them."

"Office" the Duchess for a moonlight spin for two. She jockeyed out of it without telling him, as well she might have and very well she could have, just where he got off at with her. When he sent her a truckload of roses she gave them to her maid, and when he tried to get serious and sinister she became frothy and effervescent.

And thus the days and the evenings wheeled along, and the Monk and the Duchess were contented and mildly entertained with the inconsequential incidents of Landsmere life and the welcome interim of worryless, weariless existence, just active enough to keep blood circulating, just meaningless enough to keep it from sizzling.

The Monk was never a talkative bird. In his own circles he retained a dignified aloofness that belied the recognized champion of his calling, the financier of his flock, the husband of the undisputed beauty-in-chief of all crookdom. Here, fearing a faux pas in the hearing of these better educated strangers, he said

part of it is, I'm with them."

"Oh, it's all right for a while," grunted the Monk. "You'd get tired of this soon, though, an' them educated fingers o' yours—more power to 'em—would soon start to itch after the Jack these cuckoos are mindin' for you."

"Not a chance. When my fingers start to feel fidgety, us for the green fields of Broadway and Randolph street. But nothing doing here—I want to enjoy this like any other boob, and I want to be able always to look back at it and remember what a good time you and I had slumming among the stumps. These people don't know much, but they do own the lowdown on this piece of mind thing, Monk. I try to be sorry for them, but it don't go, somehow."

"You mean you'd like to chuck up the—the whole world—an' live like these peanuts?"

"N—no, I guess I couldn't do that. But a little of it don't go bad, does it?"

"A little of it goes a long way with me, sweetie. But if it looks good to you, I'm for it. You look immense, by the way,

even less. He was an expert listener, and could hide behind a mask of reticence and diffidence his alert perception and his sharp intuition. The Duchess, quite at home in any collection, was her breezy self, perfectly proper, though never prudish. The society bug had bitten her rather distinctly. She loved the formal little etiquettes and the chatter and the routine. She actually found herself dressing as carefully for these unimportant outsiders as she would have for first-class saps who would yield returns on the investment or the inner ring of the underworld elite where folks really mattered.

She said so to the Monk as they stood at their garden gate looking over the vista of Landsmere homes and contemplating their new atmosphere and their new impulses.

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This country air or the society o' the feeble-minded seems to agree with you."

"Yes, I can even stand for that Manners. He gets on my nerves, but my nerves can take almost anything right now, they're so rested up and steady."

"Yeh—that Manners! I have to laugh at him, but some day I'm gonna forget where I am—an' who I am, an' the present—and swing one on his puss if he don't stop pinchin' your arm an' givin' you the come-on so wide open that even these here half-wits are jerry to him."

"Oh, don't let him spoil the party, Monk. He's as much to me as that tree—just part of the landscape and the scheme of things as Landsmere."

"All right, doll—but if I slip a cog, don't blame me. He's givin' me a fussy."

"Oh, listen—he—here he comes now!"

Up the walk approached Digby Manners, who had turned in from the driveway. He was attired in a pepper-and-salt sport jacket with belts and pockets and straps and leather buttons, duck trousers, tennis shoes, striped hose, an outing shirt open at the neck, and a white canvas hat. In his hand he carried a thick stick. In the corner of his mouth was a steaming cigar that looked like a young rep.

"Hello, most charming of blonde creatures," he hailed. "Lo, Dutton, old man. Is there a bottle of fiz water, a chunk of ice and maybe a drop of Scotch on the premises? I'm perishing for liquid nourishment."

He was ushered onto the porch, and the Duchess herself served and poured. Manners proffered a cigar to the Mole, returned it to his pocket without waiting for the answer—the Mole had turned down so many from the same box—and then Manners set himself squarely on his wicker rocker, and addressed the Mole.

"Dutton, old man," he stormed, "you know, I've taken a great fancy to you."

"And to my wife."

"Eh? You—yes—of course, of course. Who wouldn't be charmed by your amiable, beautiful and genial wife, eh?"

"Well, I think pretty well of her."

"Naturally. But that is away from the point."

"Oh, is there a point?"

"Is there? Dutton! There is, indeed, a point. I did not come here just socially this time. I am on a mission—a mission of friendship."

"That's fine," was all that the Mole could think of to observe.

"Yes, I shouldn't talk business at Landsmere. Heaven knows, I flew here to get away from all the muck of money making. But this has been pushed on me—forced on me, so to say. And, in all justice, it isn't such a bad visitation. No, not half bad, I should venture."

The Duchess refilled his sweating glass and he wiped his sweating forehead.

"Before I left New York, I had all but completed arrangements to begin drilling on some of my Oklahoma leasehold. I thought the matter would go over until my return. But it seems, old man, that live holes around there are so much in demand, and the fever is so jumpy over them, that they've gone ahead and pushed the thing, see?"

"Well, what do you think has happened?"

Neither the Monk nor the Duchess could think of anything. "Well, they've set yourself for this—they've brought in a well! Yes, my good friends, they've brought in a goose gusher, the first tap out of that delicious soil. Can you touch that for a knockout?" They could not.

Here's a telegram from one of my engineers—on the ground. Read that, Dutton, old man. Read that."

The Monk read it. He had not only read a few like it before, but had sent some and had many more sent. The Duchess always kept a few in stock.

"Oh, my good friends! The greatest product this world has ever let loose from its fruitful bowels. More men and women have gotten rich off it, all of a sudden, than of gold, silver, diamonds, moonshine booze or any other commodity this universe has ever yielded. Eh?"

"Right," said the Duchess. "Now, where's that point?"

"Coming, my fascinating friend—coming; here, in fact. The point is this: I like you, both of you. Have liked you—both of you—from the first second I clapped an eye on you—both of you. And since this great good fortune has come to me, I've decided to let you in on it."

"Both of us?"

"Yes," Manners shot at the Mole. "Both of you. This is advance info. The news of this strike won't hit the market for thirty-six hours. I own 200,000 shares of stock in this lease, the Golconda Gusher Group. The stock is selling at 6 to-day on the curb. In a week it will be past a hundred, and it will go to a hundred and a half, mark my words."

"We congratulate you," said the Duchess, dryly.

"Don't congratulate me—I have enough—millions. Congratulate yourselves."

"I don't exactly see," interposed the Mole, "where this is any congratulatory matter for us."

"No? Well, I'm going to let you in on it. I have in my pocket a blank order for 50,000 shares. For \$2,000 it's yours. Write your check now, and you'll sit on top of the world next Saturday. Here's the order—in your name—I had it typewritten before I came here."

The Monk began to slowly rise, but the Duchess, with a quick move, sat herself on his lap and threw her arms about his neck, whispering in his ear:

"Nix!" The Mole subsided.

"We'll talk it over and we'll be at your house after dinner, Mr. Manners," she said.

"Why not now? This is—"

"After dinner, Manners," said the Mole.

"Very well, I'll be waiting. Congratulations. I know you'll come in, of course." And he waddled off.

The Mole and the Duchess sat a full minute looking at one another.

"Well," growled the Mole. "Can you beat that?"

"Golconda Gusher!"

"An' you said this here hangout o' chumps was a haven o' peace an' honesty."

"Well, what'll we do about it?"

"You'll go right over there after dinner, blonde. An' I'll walk in on you. I know he'll make a play, an' if he don't, you fall on his neck when I whistle. We'll badge that double-crossin' sharpshooter for his wad. Tonight I'll go through Landsmere like a cyclone. Then we'll blow in the car before daylight with the junk—that's what we'll do."

"We'll have to, dear. There's nothing else we can do now."

"You betcha. That square stuff is off. We'll clean this outfit so there won't be enough for the ashman to pick up, that's what we'll do." And, of course, that's what they did.

But the Duchess sighed a little when she went through the motions for she was automatically saying to herself already: "Goodness! What will people say?"